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Plans for program cuts move forward at WKU

By AARON MUDD amudd@bgdailynews.com Apr 12, 2019

Plans to suspend 101 academic programs offered at Western Kentucky University and reinvent another 55, among other changes, took a step forward Friday.

The Academic Affairs Committee of WKU's Board of Regents accepted the recommendation, setting the stage for the full board to take a final vote during its May 10 meeting.

During the meeting, WKU President Timothy Caboni framed the proposal as a fresh start for the university to improve its program offerings, rather than just a move to cut nearly a third of its 380 total academic programs.

“The instinct in these moments is to think about and focus on the things we might stop doing, and that would be a mistake,” Caboni said, pivoting to another aspect of the recommendation that suggests transforming 55 programs in light of changing student demand.

“What’s important about the (Comprehensive Academic Program Evaluation) process is that we’ve identified 55 programs across the university that we’re going to take a look at,” he said.

He said the programs would be changed to reflect both student and market demands.

“We’re going to connect them directly to what students want to study,” Caboni said.

After the Board of Regents has its final say next month, the university plans to work with stakeholders, including students, until the end of this year to “find creative and strategic ways to transform these programs,” according to meeting materials.

The recommendation is the result of a review by the Comprehensive Academic Program Evaluation Committee, a group with 15 faculty representatives and three staff.

The nine-month process brought together stakeholders from across the university, with most of the suspensions recommended at the program and college levels, according to materials presented at the meeting Friday. The CAPE Committee itself recommended only five additional programs be cut.

Among programs targeted for suspensions are majors in popular culture, French and art education and minors in economics, biology, chemistry, mathematics and other sciences. Minors in the humanities are also targeted, including theater, English and government.

In announcing the proposal Monday through a campuswide email, Acting Provost Cheryl Stevens said that, of the 101 academic programs recommended for suspension, 11 are undergraduate degrees, four graduate degrees and 86 are other credentials such as minors and certificates.

“Of these (programs), 42 currently have no students – one undergraduate, four graduate and 37 other credentials. The majority of the remaining programs have fewer than 10 students enrolled in each,” Stevens wrote in the email.

Two hundred and nine programs are recommended to be maintained and another 15 are recommended to be grown or enhanced “based on a record of sustained growth or documented new market opportunities,” according to board meeting materials.

The full recommendation is online at bgdailynews.com with this story.

Leading up to the Academic Affairs Committee’s motion to accept the recommendation, Faculty Regent Claus Ernst attempted to introduce an amended motion he’d prepared in advance. However, after failing to get a second, the motion died.

Ernst’s motion suggested allowing Acting Provost Stevens to review the CAPE Committee’s final recommendations and review appeals where the committee upheld a decision to suspend certain programs. It notes that only 12 such appeals exist

Ernst declined to comment on the CAPE Committee’s recommendation following Friday’s board meeting.

During the meeting, Staff Regent David Brinkley thanked the faculty and staff for devoting their time to the CAPE process.

“It has been a difficult process but necessary to move us forward,” he said.

According to meeting materials, the Ogden College of Science and Engineering bore the brunt of the program suspensions with 36 programs cut. The Potter College of Arts and Letters was second at 26 programs suspended.

WKU is required to continue offering those suspended programs for students currently enrolled in them, but it will stop taking new students at the beginning of the fall 2019 semester.

As for any potential job losses, those aren't likely to happen right away, either. Campus officials have said faculty and instructors could be shifted to teaching their courses as part of WKU's general education requirements, even if they aren't teaching those courses in a dedicated academic program any longer.

"We certainly don't have planned layoffs at this point," Special Assistant to the Provost Merrall Price told the Daily News on Tuesday. "We're not planning at this point to go in and cut specific jobs."

In a meeting with journalists Friday after the board meeting, Price said the university hasn't linked the changes to an exact dollar amount that would be saved.

Acting Provost Stevens told reporters that, when it comes to program cost, "It really wasn't a huge factor" in formulating the recommendation.

She did, however, suggest that there could be a cost savings by needing fewer adjunct faculty after consolidating how many courses the university needs to offer.

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CAPE Committee Program Recommendations
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WKU announces recommended cut of 101 academic programs

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